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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001085

SIPDIS

NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER/GAVITO
DRL FOR KRAMER/BARGHOUT
INL FOR JOHNSON/BLOOMQUIST

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PINS](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: NEW INTERIOR MINISTER WILL FOCUS ON BOTH
ELECTIONS AND SECURITY

REF: A. BEIRUT 001024
[B](#). BEIRUT 001076
[C](#). BEIRUT 001075

Classified By: CDA William Grant for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) During an introductory call with the Charge Grant on July 23, newly appointed Interior Minister Ziyad Baroud said that he has a comprehensive vision for the Ministry portfolio and stressed that he will focus both on electoral and security issues. He said that the Ministry itself, rather than the UN or another body, would take charge of donor coordination activities related to election reform. In terms of security, Baroud had been briefed on the USG's extensive cooperative program with the Internal Security Forces and said that he would welcome future discussions on additional programs. Turning to politics, he told us that the Ministerial Declaration would be difficult to negotiate and may require intervention from President Sleiman at some point, but he does not believe that the Hizballah arms issue will "derail the whole process." He fears that delays in the drafting will increase tension and security threats throughout the country. Finally, he acknowledged that the reception of Samir Kuntar had shocked many of Lebanon's allies. "The President weighed the decision carefully and his actions reflect a desire for consensus and unity in the country." End Summary

Moving Up to Minister

[1](#)2. (C) Baroud, a long-time Embassy contact for civil society initiatives and one of the Lebanese civil society representatives at the 2007 French-sponsored political dialogue in St. Cloud, acknowledged that his move to the Ministry had surprised a number of observers. "I am an independent," Baroud told us. "I was chosen by the President and my appointment should tell you a lot about President Sleiman's desire to depoliticize some key ministries." When asked if he would "represent" President Sleiman in cabinet meetings, Baroud said that, while he had no intention of abandoning his core "civil society beliefs," he agreed with the majority of President Sleiman's principles and vision for the country. "We must move forward with a consensus. Lebanon is not a country that can ever be peacefully ruled by a controlling or ruling majority."

[1](#)3. (C) Baroud told us that the Ministry was in the midst of a major reorganization effort. "But I am not firing competent

people. The nephew of the former minister is a hard-working and intelligent employee. Many were surprised to learn that he would keep his job, but I want competent people working for me." He said he personally asked for the transfer of Colonel Eli Baradi, formally a strategic communications specialist at the ISF. Baroud said the I|-gf&9Qs twelve directorates, Baroud said that would require agreement by the Council of Ministers. "As it should. No one person should have that much power," said Baroud. "Additionally, any changes to the overall security structure in Lebanon should not happen abruptly. Real change will be more effective is done smoothly over a long period of time."

"The Ministry Will Lead Electoral Coordination with International Donors"

15. (C) Special Assistant raised the issue of donor coordination for electoral reform, since many international donors are involved. The local UNDP office has been angling to be the coordinator, but we have heard negative reviews of their past performance, leading us to suggest the Ministry take the lead, she said. Baroud said that is his intention. "It is time for the Ministry to demonstrate leadership and we are preparing a formal 'Master Plan' and calendar which will be ready shortly for all donors. We must, at all costs, avoid wasteful and duplicative efforts." Baroud also said he

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wanted the Ministry's electoral preparations to be completely transparent. "If I make a targeted request for assistance from one country or another, this will be processed openly and formally through the Council of Ministers."

16. (C) Baroud also expressed concern about the relatively short preparatory period before the spring 2009 parliamentary elections. "We are already late." The Charge noted that the Mission had identified USD 3.2 million in AID funds which could be rapidly dispersed for technical assistance programs, with the possibility of additional funds, as well. Baroud was grateful and said there was a lot of work to be done in a short period of time. "Coordinated and rapid donor support will be critical to our efforts."

17. (C) The Charge also raised the issue of security preparations for the election, as Baroud has commented in the media that this will be one of his top priorities. The Charge offered to work with DOD colleagues to develop a table top training exercise with USG military experts who have worked on other regional elections. Baroud was intrigued by the offer, but asked for the time to consider it carefully. "There will be sensitivities and I think it will be best to wait until after the ministerial statement has come out to explore this proposal in greater detail."

Civil Society to Get Its Own Office at the Ministry

18. (C) Rounding out his discussion of electoral issues, Baroud told us that he views Lebanese civil society as his "partner" for the electoral preparations. A long-time member of a number of civil society organizations credited with keeping this issue alive, Baroud has decided to open the GOL's doors formally to these groups to encourage a close working relationship and appropriate access. Baroud is even giving an office inside the Ministry's building to the Civil Campaign for Electoral Reform (CCER). (Note: MEPI funds have supported the activities of CCER, a consortium of 65 local NGOs working on electoral reform. A recent MEPI grant funded CCER's "Executive Secretariat", which provides professional-level lobbying and strategic communications resources to the members. End Note.) (Ref A)

Appreciation for USG Cooperation with the ISF

¶9. (C) Baroud had been briefed on the extent of the INL cooperative program with the ISF. He said that General Rifi, in particular, was very pleased with the program. Baroud is interested in exploring additional cooperative efforts with the USG. His most immediate task is to identify resources to address Beirut's growing traffic problems. "This would be a visible program for the citizens, whose quality of life is impacted by the traffic jams every day. The Ministry must show tangible results on this issue."

¶10. (C) Baroud also assured the Charge that the ISF and General Security would continue to support the Embassy's security needs. Finally, he thanked the USG for its most recent contribution of USD 6 million to support community policing initiatives for the ISF in Lebanon's Palestinian refugee camps.

"Political Climate is Better After Doha, But Still Not Stable"

¶11. (C) When asked for his thoughts on politics, Baroud said that it was a bit early to make a judgment on the cabinet, which has only come together once for a ceremonial session. "Doha made a difference, but we have a long way to go before we can assure the people that there will be long-term stability in Lebanon."

¶12. (C) Baroud believes that negotiations on the ministerial statement will not be easy. In fact, he said it is likely that President Sleiman will have to intervene at some point to break a deadlock on one issue or another. When asked if the issue in question would be Hizballah arms, Baroud said that he did not think it would prove to be the ultimate stumbling block. "There is always the option to turn that over to the National Dialogue."

¶13. (C) However, Baroud remains concerned about Lebanon's

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security situation if the statement is delayed. He believes that recent violent clashes in both the north of Lebanon and the Ain-el-Hiweh refugee camp reflect larger political tensions, both domestic and regional. "We need to get this statement behind us if we want to stem politically-motivated violence."

¶14. (C) Finally, the Charge conveyed the USG's concerns about the GOL's warm welcome during Samir Kuntar's return from Israel on July 16. Baroud acknowledged that the sight of the President, Prime Minister and other government officials at the airport welcome ceremony had shocked many. However, he said that President Sleiman had weighed the options and felt that it was important to show national unity on this event, which was being celebrated by so many Lebanese citizens. "It was his decision and people must respect that," said Baroud.

Comment

¶15. (C) Baroud seems to be adopting the more formal tone of his office, perhaps in response to some who said he lacked enough "gravitas" for the position. However, he still seems to be a controversial and uncomfortable choice for some of the more established political figures in the country. Defense Minister Murr said he was a "weak person who would try to please everyone" (Ref B). Walid Jumblatt also told us that he believes Baroud is a good person, but doubts he has the strength to fight corruption in the ministry (Ref C). March 14 Secretary General Fares Souaid, however, said Baroud is considered a good choice for March 14, though he will likely focus on technical issues and try to avoid getting bogged down in political gamesmanship.

¶16. (C) Baroud also seems to be working hard to dispel the image that he will only focus on electoral issues. Two of his closest contacts, Khalil Gebara of the Lebanese

Transparency Association and Osama Safa of the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, told us last week that Baroud had closer ties to the Lebanese security agencies than many knew.

He was deeply involved in prison reform efforts a few years ago and seems to have developed a close relationship to a number of key ISF officers. Also, he quietly served as a legal advisor to then LAF Commander Sleiman on the constitutional implications of his presidential candidacy. We have also heard from a number of sources that Baroud is close to the Patriarch and well-connected to a number of key Christian families in the Metn area. End Comment.

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